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Book Review: School Books

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School Books

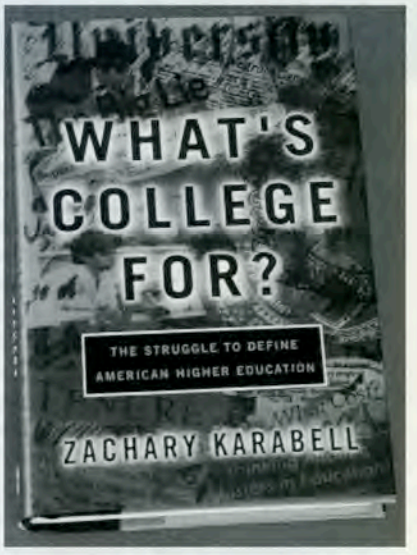
by Charles Angell

"For every complex problem," H. L. Mencken wrote—and I take the quote from Richard Russo's wonderful novel about academic life, *Straight Man*—"there is a simple solution. And it's always wrong." Zachary Karabell's *What's College For?* and Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* both argue that the problems with American higher education have less to do with the fringe benefits enjoyed by the professoriat—the inane notions that professors work only eight hours a week or become drones on the public payroll the instant they receive tenure—than with how colleges and universities find themselves situated within late twentieth-century American society. Both authors view the problem differently. Karabell finds university professors out of touch with American society at large; Readings suggests that under the pressures of global capitalism, the university no longer functions within the nation-state as the means whereby citizens shape their identities.

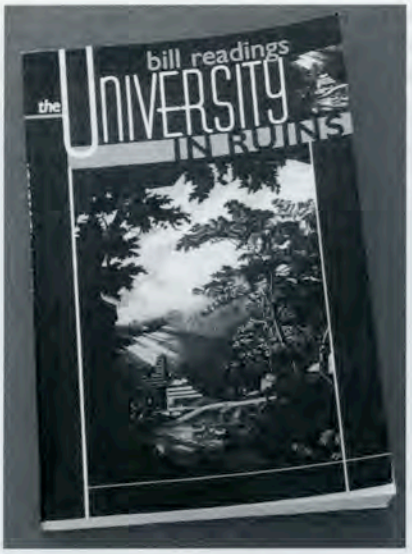
What's College For? examines the "split between what professors are trained to do [research] and what public institutions of higher learning hire them to do [teach]." He points out that all too often the debate about higher education is framed in terms of the Harvards, Yales, Stanfords, and other elite institutions where the professor's working conditions differ markedly from those institutions where most college faculty find employment. Conditions for teaching and learning at schools like Bridgewater State College, for better or ill, are more the norm than the conditions found in Cambridge or Palo Alto. Karabell considers the "most pressing issue in higher education today . . . the widening chasm between professors and the larger society." This chasm results, he feels, from the "professional structures" of academia which remain closer to the structures of medieval craft guilds than to the structures demanded of a modern campus. While the guild or discipline determines the standards for research and publication that allow its members to advance, the contemporary college requires teachers who can instruct students in the "histories that speak to their experience."

Karabell presents a series of chapters that consider the issues confronting undergraduate and graduate students, the professors, and tenure, but it is his chapter devoted to "History Standards" that illustrates how divorced the academics are from the wider society. Trained as an historian, Karabell explains that the history standards project attempted to formulate "an integrated program of research, development, and national dissemination to improve the teaching of history in the nation's schools." Receiving advice and suggestions from diverse constituencies, a panel of distinguished historians promulgated an extensive curriculum to achieve that end. The historians were wholly unprepared for the controversy that erupted. Professors found themselves pitted against politicians, mostly conservative, who felt that the standards ignored, perhaps even betrayed, key figures and moments in American history. Academic concerns about teaching history as a morally neutral set of problems and questions confronted a political construing of American history as a set of morally uplifting and heroic stories intended to inculcate civic virtue and what it means to become an American. "In numerous ways," Karabell concludes, "the story of the National History Standards Project presents a picture of professors marching to the beat of a very different drummer than other groups in society." Owing to their insulation and isolation that allowed seeing themselves as specialists speaking to other specialists, the professors were unable to command the media—which they too often neglected and scorned—with anywhere near the skill mustered by the politicians to communicate their concerns to a wider public.

This insularity from the wider society, made stronger by tenure, permits the academic guilds to control what research is worthwhile, who publishes in what journals, and who, in fact, gains



Zachary Karabell, *What's College For?* (Basic Books, 1998)



Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Harvard University Press, 1996)

admission to the profession. "These guilds color every aspect of higher education today, and aside from those hundred or so select institutions, the effect is deleterious." Karabell asserts that good teaching and public service, particularly in publicly funded colleges, should provide the benchmark for professional advancement, but, as he's noted earlier in his book, "any assistant professor will attest [that] good teaching and a plethora of service will be of little avail [for promotion and tenure] if the research doesn't satisfy certain standards." Rather, he argues, professors should involve themselves more deeply in community and local issues, with primary and secondary schools, and with service groups. Academics must identify themselves less as members of a specialized discipline, more as public servants with a strong institutional commitment.

What's College For? offers an accessible, if polemical, analysis of the problems in academia, yet it does not fully account for the hollowness—some might go so far as to say fraudulence—many older professors feel about what they're doing . Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins* suggests why these feelings may arise. Readings argues that "since the nation-state is no longer the primary instance of the reproduction of global capitals, 'culture'—as the symbolic and political counterpart to the project of integration pursued by the nation-state—has lost its purchase. The nation-state and the modern notion of culture arose together, and they are, I argue, ceasing to be essential in an increasingly transnational global economy." Readings means essentially that the global marketplace has effaced national boundaries and penetrated into every activity. People see themselves less as citizens of a nation-state and more as participants in a global marketplace where Disney, professional sports, and Celebrity Cruise Lines supply their leisure needs. In this context, education ceases to provide the means whereby people learn their roles as citizens of a nation-state and comes to represent one more consumer commodity. The university has responded to this situation "by transforming itself from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation."

For most of this century, the university's defining mission has been to inculcate and transmit national culture; recently, its mission has become that of demonstrating 'excellence.' Readings points out that administrators routinely cite 'excellence' as an "integrating principle" since excellence as a concept "has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless or to put it more precisely, non-referential." Using examples, some of them unintentionally humorous like the 'excellence in parking' award at Cornell, Readings demonstrates how 'excellence' serves administrators as a "unit of currency" that permits "a means of relative ranking among the elements of an *entirely closed system.*" Universities emphasize their efficiencies and cost benefits, marketing themselves as "best buys." What this means is that accountability becomes accounting—the bottom line. The sweatshirt bought at the college bookstore as much indicates consumer satisfaction as the course of study.

Anyone who has worked in higher education the last decade or more will recognize and respond to Readings' analysis of the university as a bureaucratic organization. Satisfying the consumer, or in academic jargon 'the client population,' has become the goal. Thus accountability boils down to tests and evaluations that produce statistical measures of how much value has been added to the clients and how satisfied they are with it. Knowledge itself becomes quantified as information easily presentable on a bar graph or pie chart. The Massachusetts' teacher certification tests offer a perfect example of this process; so, too, do the student evaluations of faculty which are in reality consumer satisfaction surveys that differ little from those handed out at shopping malls. Administrators are enamored of projecting overhead charts to show faculty, who left to their own devices might construe the figures as evidence of deplorable learning conditions, how well their college stacks up against other benchmark institutions. "Look how well," the administrator will say, "our cost per student compares to Roadkill State or Sweatshop City College." Value becomes the product of accounting. Value questions—does such quantification even remotely indicate an education's worth? Is American society willing to provide the resources to educate its children?—go unasked and unanswered.

Readings' analysis, in Hamlet's words, may be "caviar for the general." It is philosophical, detailed, and historically informed—certainly not bedtime reading and nowhere nearly as accessible as Karabell's study. Still, Readings recognizes more fully than Karabell that, *apropos* of the 'history standards,' the professors were probably better informed than their political opposition. History *is* a set of problems and questions more than it is a set of heroic tales and myths shaped by the popular culture and transmitted through the marketplace, more than an animated Pocahontas and action figures. Readings shares with Plato the belief that the purpose of an education extends beyond the search for truth to the seeking of justice. Teachers and students, he says, must think together, often in dissensus, in "ways that keep questions open" and lead to forming a just society.

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